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ABSTRACT

Educational Testing Service, in cooperation with Response Analysis Corporation and MATHEMATICA, is carrying out a research project to describe reading behaviors of American adults and to translate these behaviors into a prototype of tasks for the measurement of adult reading achievement. A household interview survey of a nationally representative sample of adults will be carried out to collect data on existing reading behavior of all types. Then panels of prominent individuals representing major constituencies within the American public will discuss the benefit they feel would accrue to individuals who can successfully perform a wide variety of reading tasks. They will be provided with a summary of the survey results and a limited number of prototype reading tasks. The outcome of these meetings will be a picture of the judged benefit values of each reading task as it relates to the particular needs and aspirations of a wide variety of population subgroups. The completed prototype will be presented to respondents to receive data parallel to those obtained in the first survey. It should be possible to develop from such a prototype a larger, flexible multipurpose pool from which reading tasks may be selected to meet user requirements. (AW)

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Targeted Research and Development Program in Reading--The Search for Criteria*

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The Targeted Research and Development Program in Reading implies by its very title a built-in emphasis on program evaluation. It is a targeted program. It has a goal or a set of goals--something to shoot at. Perhaps this would not seem very remarkable, except for our long record of emphasis on the process, as opposed to the outcomes, of education. If an effort as massive as the Right to Read is to be judged at least in part by the quality and quantity of its outcomes, then some rather careful attention ought to be, and is being paid to the definition of those intended outcomes.

My purpose in this paper is to describe a research project currently being carried out by Educational Testing Service, in cooperation with Response Analysis Corporation and MATHEMATICA. This project has as its primary purpose the description of the domain of reading behaviors of the adult American population and the translation of these reading behaviors into a prototype set of tasks or items for the measurement of adult reading achievement. This prototype set of tasks will constitute the exemplars of a larger body of reading tasks, which can then be combined in various ways to define operationally some of the goals of the Right to Read effort.

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Two required characteristics of the prototype set of reading tasks will receive special attention. First, the tasks must realistically reflect the actual everyday reading behaviors of American adults. Where necessary, the usual constraints on reading achievement test items will be lifted. Thus we are not a priori limited to tasks suitable only for group administration. Neither are we restricted to a paper and pencil response mode. If the typical real world response to a reading situation is an oral or an action response, the development of a reading task patterned after the actual situation will be considered. Second, associated with each reading task will be information concerning the benefits which may be expected to accrue to individuals who are able successfully to perform that task. Of course, the concept of "benefit" is not unidimensional, and analyses are planned to define its several meanings more precisely. In general, the information about the benefit value of reading tasks will be of two kinds: self-reported demographic characteristics and perceptions of benefit by persons to whom the tasks are administered, and judgments of persons representing several important constituencies within the national population.

At this point, I think it would be useful to give a brief overview of the major activities of the ETS research project, with minor excursions into some of the more interesting research issues. As an obvious first step toward the development of a pragmatically oriented set of reading tasks, it was considered necessary to find out what American adults read. However, in order to provide sufficient guidance for the task development process, it was necessary to go far beyond a simple determination of "what." We found that we are equally interested in questions of "when," "why," "by whom," "how often," "under what circumstances," and "how important." Although information on reading habits exists, it was decided that only a special survey could

provide the particular array of answers which were needed. Therefore, the first major element of the project will be a household interview survey of a nationally representative sample of adults, tentatively scheduled for March and April of this year. Respondents will be asked about their reading activities within four content categories--books, newspapers, magazines, and mail. In addition, they will be asked about reading associated with several classes of daily activity--meals, work, working around the house, school, traveling or commuting, shopping, club or church, theater, game, or other public event, and recreation and free time. The interviews are designed to elicit reports of reading behavior at all levels, from the technical journal to the corner stop sign. Respondents will be asked the duration of each reading activity, their perception of its importance to them, whether they experienced any reading difficulty, and if so, why. In addition, a rather complete array of descriptive data will be obtained for each respondent, which will enable us to describe the degree to which he seems to be enjoying the economic, cultural, and social benefits of our society.

Although the interview procedure requires no reading by the respondent, a somewhat different body of information will be obtained from self-reported non-readers. If the respondent cannot read English but is literate in another language, that language will be identified and a short summary of materials read will be obtained. If the respondent cannot read in any language, information will be obtained concerning the kinds of materials which are read to him, and by whom.

Data from the Reading Activities Survey will help to answer questions about reading behaviors which <u>do</u> exist. Although frequency, duration, and perceived importance of a given reading activity are important bits of information to

consider before including a task in the prototype set, they are not sufficient. In addition to knowing what Americans do read, it was considered essential to obtain informed judgments of what they ought to read. In order to accomplish this, panels of prominent individuals who represent or can speak for major constituencies within the American public will be convened to discuss the kinds and degrees of benefit they feel would accrue to individuals who can successfully perform a wide variety of reading tasks. Although no panelists have yet been selected, we are considering persons who might represent the point of view of such groups as education, labor, industry, research, the military, foreign language speaking minorities, and government. These panelists would be provided with two kinds of information. First, a summary of the results of the Survey, so that they might have a valid picture of what the American adult is in fact reading and what he thinks about it. Second, panelists will receive a limited number of prototype reading tasks, which will serve as exemplars of the major classes of reading activities reported in the Survey. These prototype reading tasks will serve the critical function of bridging the gap between a verbal description of a reading activity and the operational definition of that activity--that is, the reading task developed to measure it.

The outcome of these meetings will be a picture of the judged benefit values of each reading task as it relates to the particular needs and aspirations of a wide variety of population subgroups. There is no intention to force consensus upon these discussions, nor indeed is there probably much hope of obtaining it. The primary aim is to assure the inclusiveness of the prototype set of reading tasks, rather than to restrict or balance it in arbitrary ways. Surely there must be some limitation upon its size, but the ultimate designation of tasks to be included will probably follow some sort of disjunct

selection model. That is, a task might be selected either because it represents a frequently occurring reading activity, or a rarely occurring activity which was nevertheless judged highly important by Survey respondents, or a rarely occurring activity which was unimportant to Survey respondents but which panel members felt ought to be emphasized. Needless to say, the development of a decision rationale which will preserve the wide variety of judgments we are sure to receive, yet constrain the prototype set of tasks to a feasible number, is one of the more difficult but challenging research problems we must solve.

Following the panel meetings, the remainder of the reading task generation activity will take place. When the final prototype set has been completed, the tasks will be presented to samples of respondents under two rather different administration designs. In one instance, all or at least a substantial portion of the entire set of tasks will be administered to each examinee. These administrations will take place at centrally located testing centers, and will of necessity be relatively lengthy. The data will enable us to study task intercorrelations and therefore the dimensionality of the prototype set. In addition, either all or a representative subset of the tasks will be administered to a national sample of adults in a second household survey. Naturally, only a small number of reading tasks can be presented to a single respondent under these conditions, and therefore an item sampling administration design will be employed. That is, random subsets of reading tasks will be presented to random subsamples of respondents.

In addition to performance data on the various reading tasks, the Reading Performance Survey will yield data on respondents' characteristics and perceptions of benefit parallel to those obtained in the first survey of reading activities. The final product of the project will thus be a prototype set of reading tasks, each associated with some rather unique information. On the

more conventional side, task difficulty indices for a variety of respondent subgroups will be available, based on a national sample. Also associated with each task, however, will be data not normally available to those who wish to assemble items into measuring instruments. Benefit data of two kinds will be produced. First, the benefit of being able adequately to perform the task, as perceived and reported by the respondent himself. And second, benefit as manifest by some of the tangible and quantifiable characteristics of the respondent and his place of residence.

Thus it should be possible to develop from such a prototype set of reading tasks a more complete item pool of tasks "like these." From this larger item pool, one could then assemble custom made tests appropriate for a variety of purposes and for a variety of respondent populations, defined by a wide range of demographic variables.

Perhaps the most important point to be made about the prototype set of items to be developed is that it will <u>not</u> be an instrument. It will not be <u>the</u> criterion against which a static and predetermined Right to Read effort will be measured for the next many years. It will not be a fixed target which will force the direction of our shots for the next decade. It will be rather a flexible, multipurpose item pool from which reading tasks may be selected to meet user requirements with respect to reading content, process, response mode, and difficulty for a wide variety of target populations. The tasks will be validated against several dimensions of empirically determined benefit. And each will have associated with it indices of perceived benefit (a concept not too far removed from something called "relevance").

Perhaps the thought has occurred to you that an infinitely variable target is no target at all. One of my favorite cartoons depicts a servant with an

archery target strapped to his back, running madly in an effort to catch up with an in-flight arrow just fired by a determined looking king. We are not developing this kind of criterion either. The reading tasks to be developed will be those which someone--either experts, lay public, or both--has judged to be important and useful goals in our society. The flexibility at which we aim will operate <u>within</u> these boundaries of empirical and face validity. There can be no quarrel with the potentially movable target, provided its position is selected <u>before</u> the arrow is fired.